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ABSTRACT

A variety of classroom activities and techniques are available to motivate students, engage them, and give immediate positive feedback on oral communication, including: having students give each other elementary arithmetical exercises; circulation of vocabulary cards for immediate use on conversation, with later review; having a system of rewards for target language use outside the classroom; asking and giving directions in the target language, first within and then outside the classroom; personalized drills and conversations; teaching techniques to circumvent unknown vocabulary; teaching vocabulary in clusters of related words; using a game of mutual complimenting; encouraging thinking aloud in the target language; having students question each other on compositions they have written; other interviewing games; and imagining what acronyms might stand for. (MSE)

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SUCCESSFULLY ADAPTED ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE ORAL COMMUNICATION

1984

A distinctive characteristic of excellence in foreign language teaching is the ability to encourage the students and provide them with immediate positive feedback in the target language. Beginning with the first day of class the students should learn to say something, and leave with a sense of accomplishment. Most students come into the classroom believing that they will learn to communicate in the foreign language, and later realize, much to their dismay, that this is a slow and painful process. The excellent teacher will cause his or her students to realize from the start that even though learning a foreign language is a challenge, it is not an impossible feat.

Allen E. Hye (57) points out that scores of people have gone through two or three years of a foreign language of which they remember nothing. It is their failure that has given arguments to opponents of foreign language programs. Oral communication should be promoted and developed in the classroom, not only because the student deserves to receive what he or she expects, but because it constitutes the most effective tactic that foreign language teachers have available to defend their discipline and assure its survival, regardless of the ups and downs of the times.

Since many students come into the classroom already motivated and

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filled with high expectations, the most arduous task that lies ahead for the teacher is nourishing and sustaining that motivation. In order to accomplish this goal the teacher must allow in his or her lesson plans sufficient time for varied, personalized communicative activities in the form of games, small group work, and work in pairs. It is also imperative that he or she not permit grammar to become an end in itself, but to see it as a means of achieving intelligible and above all meaningful communication. The latter concept should not be interpreted as free conversation. One must admit that free conversation is rarely meaningful in the early stages of foreign language learning, "because it is beyond the learner's grammatical competence, it is not always understood, and it is practically never progressive or sequenced" (Omaggio, 256).

Enjoyable activities will promote a relaxed atmosphere conducive to learning. Stephen D. Krashen (43) reports an interesting hypothesis about foreign language acquisition which centers upon the idea "that we acquire best when the pressure is completely off, when anxiety is zero, when the acquirer's focus is entirely on communication; in short, when the interchange or input is so interesting that the acquirer 'forgets' that" he or she is dealing with a foreign language.

The following are some ideas for palatable classroom techniques intended to have students actively participate in the classroom procedures beginning with the first day of class, and above all to have them speak the target language about seventy-five percent of the time. Although the examples are given in Spanish, the procedures may be adapted to any other language. Most of the activities described can also be planned according

to the linguistic level and interest level of the students.

The first day of classes, after teaching greetings and the manner in which students can identify themselves by their own names, it is useful to teach the numbers in the target language up to the number of people in the class. Soon it is possible to have students giving each other elementary arithmetical exercises, and conducting mechanical drills entirely on their own. In order to accomplish the latter, each person in the classroom can be assigned a number, and the numbers can then be written on a card. Working with the book, the card is circulated around the room. As each person receives it, that person reads off the appropriate question from the textbook exercises and randomly calls out one of the numbers, putting a check by that number on the card. The student whose number has been called answers the question. The card is passed around until all the numbers have been checked. The game can be continued beyond this point; at the end of the class period the teacher collects the card and has tangible evidence of how many times each person answered questions that day. These early exercises must be done with open books, but the teacher will find that the students have to do most of the speaking in class, for they are either reading cues or producing responses. Although they are not yet in control of the target language, they are certainly using it. The teacher's role is simply to listen carefully and make sure the responses are correct.

Multiple variations of the above mentioned activity can be used: one can circulate a paper with the names of the students so they can use titles like Mr., Mrs., and Miss, or practice in Spanish "don" and "doña" when calling upon their classmates. Vocabulary building procedures can

also be accomplished when the card circulated bears the names of their favorite animals, flowers, fruits, cities that they would like to visit in the countries where the target language is spoken, and other items of interest to the students. As a warm-up activity the following day, the teacher can review the new vocabulary by asking such simple questions in the target language as "¿ Cómo se dice 'sheep' en español?" (How does one say 'sheep' in Spanish?), "¿Cómo se dice 'carnation' en español?" (How does one say 'carnation' in Spanish?), "¿Cómo se dice 'pineapple'?" (How does one say 'pineapple'?) The teacher can also utilize a map and ask: "¿Dónde está La Paz?" (Where is La Paz located?), "¿Dónde está Buenos Aires?" (Where is Buenos Aires located?). As the students progress in their learning of the language one can have them use the vocabulary learned in a complete sentence, or express a personal opinion in relation to the items used the previous day. This type of activity is very effective because students are trained from the start to do most of the talking in class, and they learn to feel comfortable when calling upon one another. The teacher can save energy and avoid voice strain while students are receiving the practice they deserve in order to learn to communicate in the target language successfully.

It is also important to encourage the students from the first day of class on to use the target language outside class each time they have an opportunity to do so. The teacher can request that they address him or her in the language each time they meet, whether on the school grounds or in the community. Students can easily be motivated to do this if a reward system is established beforehand. A creative Spanish teacher, for

example, may give students a facsimile Mexican peso or Spanish peseta each time they speak to her in the target language outside class. When the students have accumulated five pesos or pesetas, they may receive an extra point on the next test.

Asking and giving directions in the target language is another meaningful communicative activity in the foreign language classroom. Even in the early stages of language learning the students can experience the thrill of engaging in real communication in the target language. This activity can be initiated by taking into consideration the classroom environment itself and the objects that surround the students. A basic working vocabulary can be provided on a ditto sheet including lexical items such as "North", "South", "East", "West", "right", "left", "door", "window", "blackboard", "desk", "bookshelf", "bulletin board", and "map". The teacher initiates the activity by asking questions and immediately providing the answer: "¿ Dónde está el escritorio?" (Where is the desk?). "El escritorio está a la derecha". (The desk is to the right.), "¿ Dónde está la puerta?" (Where is the door?). "La puerta está a la izquierda". (The door is to the left.), "¿ Dónde está el mapa?" (Where is the map?) "El mapa está al norte." (The map is to the north.), "¿ Dónde está la ventana?" (Where is the window?). "La ventana está al sur". (The window is to the South.) After a little practice the students will ask each other questions and provide the answers. This exercise can progressively cover the school building, as students ask each other where the office, the telephone, the bathroom, or the water fountain is located. Sketches depicting prominent landmarks of the community can be used to elicit

speech involving the location of those landmarks; students can provide directions as to how to go to their homes from the school, and can also explain how to get to the towns that surround their community. The advantage of this communicative drill is that all the students can participate simultaneously by working in pairs, one asking questions and the other providing the answers. An abundant amount of vocabulary as well as grammatical patterns can be mastered while the students engage in meaningful communication. This type of activity also provides the opportunity to learn such essential vocabulary items as "Perdón. No entiendo. Repita, por favor" (Pardon me. I don't understand. Would you repeat, please?), "¿ Dónde está la farmacia?" (Where is the pharmacy?), "¿ Dónde está el correo?" (Where is the post office?), "¿ Dónde está la Embajada Americana?" (Where is the American Embassy?). Through this exercise the learner expects to be able to use the language communicatively. One must remember that the lack of real speech exchanges discourages the great majority of foreign language learners, therefore the opportunity for "authentic speech transactions" should be provided as frequently as possible in the foreign language classroom (Carton, 23-28).

As the students progress into communicative drills, the teacher must try to make such drills more meaningful by personalizing them. In order to accomplish this task it is important to teach the students the necessary vocabulary so that they are able to request or share facts about themselves or their friends, request or express personal concerns, share or elicit knowledge, opinions, judgments, or feelings; and remember or

restate the personal remarks of other members of the class (Omaggio, 257).

A very worthwhile technique to guide the students into the art of real communication is to teach them from the very early stages how to circumvent unknown words. Meaningful communication cannot take place when students constantly feel compelled to request the target language equivalent in order to complete a sentence. If in the course of a conversation they have to be asking "¿ Cómo se dice esto en español?" (How does one say this in Spanish?), the line of communication is immediately interrupted. They must be trained to describe the object or the feeling to which they are referring (VanPatten, 404). A good game which one could call "Describa el dibujo y descubra el secreto" ("Describe the Object and Discover the Secret Word") utilizes a puzzle technique. Working in small groups each student receives a labeled picture of an object which he or she must describe without revealing its name. When all the objects have been guessed, "the first letter of the name of each object is then recorded, and the combined letters spell out a group word" (Omaggio, 131). For example, each of five Spanish students may be given a picture: a boot (bota), a bear (oso), the moon (luna), a salt shaker (sal), and a firearm (arma). The secret word would be "bolsa" (purse, sack). As a follow-up activity the students report on the findings of the group including the grammatical gender of the nouns discussed. "A variation of this game involves puzzle parts depicting objects that are part of a scene to be guessed, such as pieces of furniture in a room. Groups within the class might be in competition for the first completion of the puzzle"

(Omaggio, 131). In addition to providing practice in the description of objects, games like this one promote the communication of lifelike experiences. The students will retain vocabulary more easily when the words are acquired and practiced through pleasant and meaningful experiences.

In conducting vocabulary building drills and games, it is a desirable practice to present together words that bear some relationship to one another because they belong to the same category, such as names of furniture, animals, foods, words that would be used to describe a person, and words that describe feelings of pleasure or disgust. In foreign language textbooks the vocabulary is generally organized in a logical manner and by grammatical categories. However it is a good procedure to further regroup the words so they can easily be associated with each other. One should attempt to achieve what psychologists call "categorical clustering" and take advantage of the natural association processes that take place in the human brain (Bousfield, 229-40). In practicing the vocabulary given in textbooks, teachers usually allow one block of time to see, hear, and repeat the words. A more productive method is to present vocabulary in brief but frequent intervals and offer other activities in between. The students should soon be able to see the new words in personalized contexts in order to truly internalize them. Much practice time should be allowed for abstract lexical items, for they are the most difficult to recall and often constitute an area of interference which arises from the foreign language itself. For example, Spanish adverbial expressions like "a veces" (sometimes), "a la vez" (at the same time) and all the other expressions

involving "vez" and "veces" are potential sources of confusion for the students.

A useful game to personalize newly learned adjectives is entitled "El círculo de la amistad." (Friendship Club"). Provide the students with a list of adjectives portraying desirable qualities in a person. After reviewing masculine and feminine forms, have students sit in a circle and tell what they like about the person sitting next to them. They may use the words from the list or other terms that they can remember. As a follow-up activity the teacher, with the help of the students, can prepare a list of undesirable characteristics, perhaps through the use of prefixes and the adjectives previously practiced. As a variation of this game the teacher can have the students compliment each other in the target language. The person complimented must offer a polite remark and immediately give a positive explanation for the compliment received. For example one student says: "Juan, eres un buen alumno". (John, you are a good student.); John must give an immediate reply like: "Gracias. Me gusta estudiar". (Thank you. I like to study.) Students should be encouraged to offer their compliments and replies as rapidly as possible. At the end of the activity the class can decide who offered the most original compliment or positive reply in the least amount of time.

Oral proficiency can be promoted even while students are engaged in traditionally silent endeavors such as writing compositions and completing reading assignments. The teacher may encourage them to think aloud in the target language using a moderate voice. As the teacher circulates about the room he or she may hear them say: "No me acuerdo de esta

palabra" (I don't remember this word.), or "Voy a buscar esta palabra en el diccionario." (I'm going to look up this word in the dictionary.); the teacher may then provide assitance in the target language (Hosenfeld, 53).

Another activity in which a silent task like composition can be combined with oral practice is one called "Preguntas fáciles" ("Easy Questions). The teacher has students research one cultural aspect of a country where the target language is spoken, and prepare a short composition on it. When all the written work is completed the class exchanges papers; each student prepares a set of questions on the content of the paper received, and later asks these questions to the owner of the paper in front of the class. An exercise like this will allow the students to perform well before their peers, and will encourage self-confidence and satisfaction. It is an activity more appropriate for advanced classes, but it may be adapted to elementary and intermediate levels (Capote, 266).

The interview technique is a rewarding experience when carefully planned and adapted to the linguistic level of the students. An appropriate method is to have students interview each other while working in pairs. They write down the answers received and later report the replies to the entire class. This is an activity that can be extended over several days, and it tends to satisfy the students' natural inclination to visit with each other. At the elementary level the questions can be rather simple and encompass the vocabulary learned: "¿ Cómo se llama usted?" (What's your name?), "¿ Dónde vive usted?" (Where do you live?), "Le gusta más el español o el inglés?" (Which do you like better Spanish or English?). As students become more advanced they can be interviewed about upcoming

holiday activities, their likes and dislikes, their plans for the future, and other subjects of interest to them. Before the interviews it is wise to guide the students into the line of questioning to be followed. One can provide them with a list of possible questions and vocabulary items to which they may refer.

As students advance in their linguistic skills they can engage in other activites requiring more self-confidence. A simulated press conference can bring about entertaining and valuable speaking practice. A student assumes the role of an important personality of the United States or abroad, and he or she sits at the teacher's desk or stands in front of the class. The rest of the students compete to have their questions answered by using expressions like: "Por favor, Señor Presidente." (Please, Mr. President.), "Me toca a mí, Señor Presidente.) (It is my turn, Mr. President.). The person holding the press conference selects the people whose questions he or she wants to answer, and may conclude his role any time he or she wishes by saying: "Es todo, gracias." (That's all, thank you.) Care must be taken that all students have the opportunity either to ask questions or to assume the role of the prominent personality portrayed. When enough previous preparation is done as to the roles to be assumed and the type of questions to be asked, this activity can provide much conversation practice about current events familiar to the students.

A very useful game to make students converse and use their imagination is "Siglas apocrífas" (Apocryphal Acronyms"). In order to carry out this activity one provides the students with three or four capital letters which supposedly form together an acronym. The students may

work individually or in groups, and try to imagine what the letters stand for. The teacher may give them clues as to where they might find those letters. For example, if four Spanish students are provided with the letters ANAF and are told that they may find them in a zoo, the group may arrive at the conclusion that the letters mean: "Asociación Nacional de Animales Feroces" (National Association of Wild Animals) (De Meó, 259-271).

While students are engaging in any of the activities listed above, it is important that the teacher not interrupt them to correct their errors. Teachers should not expect perfect oral performance, especially during the early stages of language study when self-confidence and motivation are the major ingredients for success. A certain amount of tolerance is also a quality in the art of foreign language teaching. As a general rule any errors that impede communication should be pointed out only after the student has completed his or her statement. Teachers who persist in the constant correction of errors while the students are speaking may not realize that they are "creating a breeding ground for frustration, inhibition, indifference and blockage of the learning process" (VanPatten, 406).

Excellence in foreign language teaching can be measured by fulfilling the expectations of the students, and by providing them with the assurance that they will be able to speak the target language. The attrition rate in foreign language enrollments would certainly be lower if teachers allowed in their lesson plans sufficient time for more enjoyable and meaningful communicative activities.

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